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Integrating theory and practice in social work: An intervention with practitioners in Finland (Accepted 18-Dec-2019)

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Abstract

How could social workers apply theory in their everyday practice? According to John Dewey, theories are helpful instruments in analysing situations and forming hypotheses which are tested in practical experiments. Inspired by Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, we designed a "Practice and Theory" pilot intervention group in which social workers were provided external, theory-driven supervision. This research is a three-case study of the pilot intervention group. Based on a thematic analysis of reflective discussions during the last group sessions and follow-up group interviews, we investigate the difficulties the social workers described in applying theoretical knowledge to practice. We explore what consequences they recognized when reflecting on and experimenting with theoretical knowledge.

Our study demonstrates that the major barriers were lack of time and access to theories, difficulties in changing one's own practice and establishing supportive structures, the lack of competence to understand the role theories and having become estranged theories. However, the positive consequences experienced in the three Practice and Theory groups suggest that the pilot

intervention could serve as a potential model for integrating theoretical research into practice. The participants considered that reflecting theories enabled new understanding as well as allowed experimenting with new ways of operating. Participating in the group also improved social workers' argumentation, helping them to recognize their own expertise. It also raised professional self-esteem and enabled self-development. In the group, the dialogical, reflective and experimental inquiry were key to understanding how theoretical knowledge can open new perspectives.

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Introduction

The relationship between theory and practice has long been discussed in social work (e.g. Sheppard, 1995; Osmond and O'Connor, 2004; Teater, 2017). Even though basic social science research rarely provides ready-made solutions, it claims to challenge tacit and experiential knowledge, have an impact on discourses, ideas and paradigms, as well as provide new understandings of problems and complex practice issues (e.g. Nilsen et al., 2011; Nutley et al., 2007, 298−301; Fook and Askeland, 2006). Thus, we wondered if there could be practical ways to support social workers to connect theory and practice in their daily work.

Researchers have proposed that applying theoretical research in practice can stimulate reflection and learning, enhance understanding of the occurring situation and help in reshaping tacit and explicit knowledge (Nutley et al., 2007, 205, 300). This idea originated with pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859−1952) and is based on his unique 'philosophy of experience' (Alhanen, 2018). Dewey (1920/1988, 146) questioned the notion from ancient philosophy that theory and practice should be separate. Dewey (1920/1988, 163, 169) considered that theories should be used as helpful instruments in reflecting and analysing situations and in forming hypotheses that are tested in practice settings.

Dewey's writings inspired us to design an intervention which would enable social workers to utilize scientific knowledge and theories as part of their practical work. Thus, we designed the 'Practice and Theory' group in which our intention was to provide social workers with external, theory-driven supervision. In science, 'theory' refers to universal knowledge (Smeeton 2015, 18)

and is most often defined as a systematic and complex explanatory system based on several concepts (Forte 2014, 47; Fook 2002, 83). In the group, as well as in this article, 'theory' meant complex theories, but also more context-specific knowledge based on scientific research, such as concepts or explanatory generalizations which can lead to forming a theory. The aim of the theory-driven supervision was to combine research-based and theoretical knowledge (theoria) with the social workers' technical knowledge (technê) related to the art of making things and practical knowledge (phronêsis) applied while acting in practice situations, as described by Aristotle (Smeeton 2015, 18).

The intervention was piloted with three intervention groups in adult social work and child protection in Finland. The research aimed to address the questions: 1) *what difficulties did the social workers describe in applying theoretical knowledge to practice* and 2) *what consequences did the social workers recognize when reflecting on and experimenting with theoretical knowledge*? The data comprised transcriptions of group interviews during the last group meeting and in a follow-up meeting organized 3 to 6 months after each group. In this article we present the findings of this research.

Pragmatism and experimental approach in knowledge production

The philosophical movement called pragmatism was developed in the United States at the end of the 19th century. The most frequently named founding fathers of pragmatism are Charles S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey, who were contemporaries of Mary Richmond and Jane Addams, the pioneers of social work. Richmond was familiar with and influenced by the discussions concerning pragmatism (Fjeldheim et al., 2015) and Addams was in ongoing correspondence with James and was a close friend with Dewey (Shields 2017, 18). Dewey and

Addams both considered that philosophy should focus on questions arising from practice and that promote people's actions (Dewey 1920/1988, 94; Shields 2017, 19). Addams was a practising pragmatist who applied the ideas of experimentation and conducted practice-related inquiry in a collaborative manner and in order to help the community (Shields 2017, 19–23).

Since Richmond's writings, the person-in-environment theory has been essential in social work (Fjeldheim et al., 2015). An understanding of the interaction between a person and the environment is also the foundation of Dewey's philosophy. Through his writings, Dewey constructed a philosophy of experience in which the starting point is an organism's interaction with its environment (Alhanen, 2018). According to Dewey (1920/1988, 129), an experience is formed when a living being acts, the environment responds to this action, and the actor goes through the consequences of these actions. When one faces a difficulty, it leads to defining the problem, forming a working hypothesis and testing it in action (Dewey, 1920/1988, 131). Thus, social work and pragmatism share a holistic view of people as a part of their environment, an approach where empirical observations are collected to support interpretations and to find solutions for situations as well as the aim of enhancing people's well-being and democracy (Hothersall, 2019).

Dewey's epistemology can be characterized as fallibilistic instrumentalism (Martela, 2019, 25). In pragmatism, knowledge is never considered absolute or certain but fallibilistic (Peirce 1897/1931, 60). According to Dewey (1920/1988, 163), theories and notions 'are always open to development through use'. Fallibilistic instrumentalism means that theories are treated as hypotheses which are tested in practice after which they can be accepted or rejected (Dewey

1920/1988, 163). Dewey described theories and notions as like tools which are confirmed if they are able provide guidance or remove a specific trouble (Dewey 1920/1988, 163, 169).

Dewey's instrumentalism should not be equated with the unquestioned application of evidence. Theories are not fixed truths but are more like cognitive maps that help people navigate in the experiential world (Martela, 2019, 11). However, familiarizing oneself with existing theoretical discussions can lead to surprising observations in the light of previous knowledge and enable abductive reasoning (Tavory and Timmermans 2014, 41). For example, a practitioner could reason that tension in a meeting with a client could, based on Goffman's work (1955/2016), depend on the client's experience of losing face. The preliminary abductive working hypothesis is then clarified by forming a deductive hypothesis and testing it in an inductive experiment (Peirce, 1903/1934, 106) by doing positive facework.

Previous research on using theoretical knowledge in practice

By definition, professional social work is 'underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences and humanities' (IASSW, 2014). However, social workers may find theoretical knowledge distant and irrelevant (Sheppard, 1995, 265). Research suggests that social workers' lack of time, access or competence in making sense of and using research, limit research-informed practice (Teater, 2017; Gray et al., 2012; Beddoe, 2011; Nutley et al., 2007, 81−83). Moreover, a lack of autonomy to implement the research as well as the organizational culture and hostile attitudes towards research can also be barriers (Gray et al., 2012, 163; Nutley et al., 2007, 81–83).

In an empirical research study (Sheppard and Ryan, 2003), social workers who formed hypotheses about a current case more often applied rules based on law and organizational policies than rules based on research findings or theoretical social science concepts. When the social

workers used theoretical concepts to explain the case, it was unclear whether they had recognized the exact meaning of the concepts or had only absorbed them as a part of everyday language.

Other research suggests that although social workers speak of formalized research-based knowledge, they do not necessarily themselves recognize it or they may consider it generalized knowledge (Osmond and O'Connor, 2004). Sometimes social workers can acknowledge an underpinning theory but may feel uncertain or might belittle their own knowledge (Osmond and O'Connor, 2004). Practice does not require the use of theoretical language (Osmond and O'Connor, 2004) and social workers may lack confidence and the relevant vocabulary to engage in scholarly conversations (Beddoe, 2011).

According to Steve Hothersall (2017), using research findings and theoretical constructs varies between different types of practice situations, practice fields and between organizations and organizational cultures. Social workers may consider that the integration of theory and practice is quite axiomatic and instinctive. Social workers may also conflate policy or procedures with the status of theory and be reluctant to apply theories situationally.

Researchers have suggested that organizational structures support research-minded practitioners to apply research in practice (e.g. McBeath and Austin, 2015) and written guidebooks for practitioners on how to use theories (e.g. Forte, 2014). Group models for theoretical reflection have also been presented. For example, in the critical reflection model developed by Jan Fook and Fiona Gardner (2007), the starting point is an incident presented by a participant, though critical theories underpinning the model are also introduced to the participants and applied in the discussion. In Sweden, researchers have organized managers in the municipal welfare and educational sector into multi-professional reflection groups to support them in their leadership. The starting points in these groups have been participants' real-life situations or concerns and the

group facilitator has contributed research-based knowledge in the reflective discussions (Nilsen et al., 2011).

The pilot intervention

The empirical research reported in this article concerns the experiences of social workers who have attended one of the three Practice and Theory pilot intervention groups operating in 2015–2017. Each group met 5 to 6 times over two months. As the group was designed to be integrated into the social workers' busy schedules, the researchers prepared only one-sheet-long summaries of theories or scientific research. The groups discussed, for example, Goffman's idea of facework, Peirce's three basic semiotic elements, Buber's understanding of I–Thou and Latour's Actor-Network Theory. Social work research was also included, such as Tarja Juvonen's (2014) culturally determined concept of 'having-to' or Lonne et al.'s (2016) ethical decision-making principles in child protection.

We chose theories or research that we as facilitators were familiar with and could easily discuss. We also selected contents that we considered were relevant for the participants. For example, we considered that Peirce's semiotics would relate to everyday social work practice in how social workers make interpretations of a situation. We also urged the social workers to suggest theories or share troubling real-life situations that we could propose theories for. In the first group, one new summary was added to the material, but generally the participants considered that the chosen theories were relevant and the selection was sufficient. The participants said that if they had been expected to propose theories or a piece of research, they would have felt insecure and only mentioned those they were familiar with.

In every meeting except the final one, the group *first* chose one of the abstracts we had prepared and discussed it. *Second*, the participants set themselves a small task for the coming weeks.

Third, the group met again two weeks later, and each social worker shared their observations and experiences which were reflected collaboratively. Instead of asking direct questions, we used the method of narrative collaboration (Gubrium & Holstein 1997). The participants were requested to tell stories about their observations and experiments. The storytelling respected the normative expectations for turn-taking. Through the narrative and dialogical discussions, the participants first deconstructed theoretical conceptualizations and then reconstructed the conceptualizations using their practical experiences (Forte, 2014, 91). *Fourth*, the cycle was repeated with a new theory or research.

In the group, the participants applied the pragmatic maxim by considering what practical bearings the chosen conception would have in their practice (Peirce 1878/1934) and whether the notion could operate as an instrument in reorganizing some situation or perplexity they had encountered (Dewey 1920/1988, 169). The idea in the Practice and Theory group was to observe practice through 'theoretical lenses'. Applying a theoretical lens can help to deconstruct research results and enables contextualising them. This reflective, critical and context-sensitive approach can be considered a strength in relation to the critique addressed to the linear application of interventions and guidelines in a narrow evidence-based practice.

In the group, taking a piece of research as a starting point for reflection differs from other reflective group models (Kivipelto & Yliruka, 2012; Nilsen et al., 2011; Fook and Gardner, 2007) and from external group supervision provided to Finnish social workers regularly. Although theoretical knowledge initiates the reflection, theory is not privileged over practice. Experimenting with theoretical knowledge and obtaining a fallibilistic attitude is at the heart of pragmatism and with theories this means that 'we must be on the lookout quite as much for indications to alter them as for opportunities to assert them' (Dewey 1920/1988, 163). In the

Practice and Theory group discussions, the social workers combined theory with their practical knowledge and observations. When this kind of experimental and reflective approach is used ‘knowing ceases to be contemplative and becomes practical’ (Dewey 1920/1988, 146).

The pilot intervention groups can also be reflected on critically. *First,* there is a potential risk for privileging theories over the participants’ personal experiences. However, we consider that the threat was avoided through the understanding of fallibilistic instrumentalism which we discussed with participants. *Second,* it is possible that by adopting and interpreting a situation through a vague theoretical understanding and without critical analytical skills, a social worker may analyse a situation single-mindedly and fall into a confirmation bias. The participants’ academic degree (MSW) created a basic foundation for understanding the theories but it was important to collaboratively agree that the purpose of the group was not to uncover certain truths but to discuss the possible interpretations and perspectives with a critical and fallibilistic attitude.

Third, it can be questioned if the short presentation of a theory or scientific research provides sufficient understanding and leads to ethical practices. The experienced practitioners were familiar with the professional code of ethics and organizational policies that support ethical practice and they carried out their experiments in an ethical and reflective manner. Moreover, the practitioners only conducted small experiments and their actions only focused on empowering the clients (e.g. trying to do positive facework).

Research process

As this qualitative research is focused on understanding and finding practical ways to solve the problem of how social workers can connect theory to their practice, it is social work practice research founded on pragmatism (Anastas 2012). Pragmatism embraces methodological

pluralism (Anastas 2012) and emphasizes observing the practical consequences (Dewey 1920/1988, 168–169). Therefore, our research is a three-case study where qualitative interviews are used to collect data on the participants' experiences of three different Practice and Theory groups.

Data collection

The social workers were invited to attend the group via a letter in which the group's purpose and collection of research data were presented. The organizations' ethical boards granted us research permissions and the participants were asked to sign an agreement on participating in the research as part of the group. Participating in the group and the research was voluntary for the social workers. All of the enrolled participants gave their consent and were enthusiastic about their groups.

The research is based on data collected from three different groups. The data consist of reflective group interviews concerning the group and were collected during the last sessions of the three Practice and Theory groups (total 16 participants) and from follow-up meetings held 3 to 6 months later (total 14 participants). In the group interviews we were interested in both the groups' activities and their significance for the participants' own expertise. In the follow-up meetings we were interested in hearing what sorts of effects participation in the group had had for the participants. The demographics of the pilot groups and the data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Pilot groups and research data

	Social work unit	**Facilitator**	**Group meetings**	**Participants in groups**	**Interviewed participants**	**Transcribed data pages**
Pilot group 1 (2015)	Adult social work – One agency, different teams	Kääriäinen A (external supervisor) & Muurinen H (with a team manager position)	5	6 persons	1. 6 persons 2a. 1/6 person 2b. 4/6 persons	1. 24 pp. 2a. 26 pp. 2b. 38 pp.
Pilot group 2 (2016)	Child protection – One city, different agencies	Kääriäinen A (external supervisor) & Muurinen H (no team manager position)	6	4 persons	1. 3 persons 2. 3/3 persons	1. 26 pp. 2a. 18 pp.
Pilot group 3 (2017)	Child protection – One agency; one participant from another city	Kääriäinen A (external supervisor) & Fagerström I (development planner, no research position)	5	6 persons	1. 5 persons 2. 4/5 persons	1. 30 pp. 2. 23 pp.
Total			16	16 persons	14-16 persons	185 pages (9h 46 min)

Research analysis

In analysing the data, we used thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006) and researcher triangulation (Yin, 2009). First, both researchers familiarized themselves with the

data and then created initial codes for the relevant extracts. The sub-themes of the coded extracts were combined. At this stage, we compared our analysis and the themes we had defined. There were no major differences. An example of the analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. An example of the thematic analysis.

Data extract	**Coded for**	**Sub-theme**	**Over-reaching theme**
I remember from my studies that those theories didn't interest me in any way, or somehow they felt distant, so I thought "who cares, I'll learn at work" or something…	During studies theories felt distant	Lack of competence to understand of the role theories	Social workers experience difficulties in integrating theory to practice
I feel almost sort of empowered in a way, that in our work we can apply this sort of theory, I think it's been lovely to notice that, or somehow that it's possible.	Empowering to realizing how theoretical discussions connect to practice	Recognizing one's expertise and having professional self-esteem raised	Reflecting and experimenting with theories has positive consequences

After comparing and merging some of the sub-themes, we had a total of 17 sub-themes. Of these, we formed four over-arching themes: 1) social workers experience difficulties in integrating theory into practice, 2) reflecting and experimenting with theories has positive consequences, 3) shared knowledge production is significant and 4) external supervision is not a sufficient supportive structure alone. In this article, due to constraints to the word count, we only present the results of the analysis regarding themes 1 and 2. The themes 3 and 4 are reported elsewhere (Kääriäinen and Muurinen, in review). The results of the entire thematic analysis and the numbers of coded extracts in each of the two themes are presented in Figure 1.

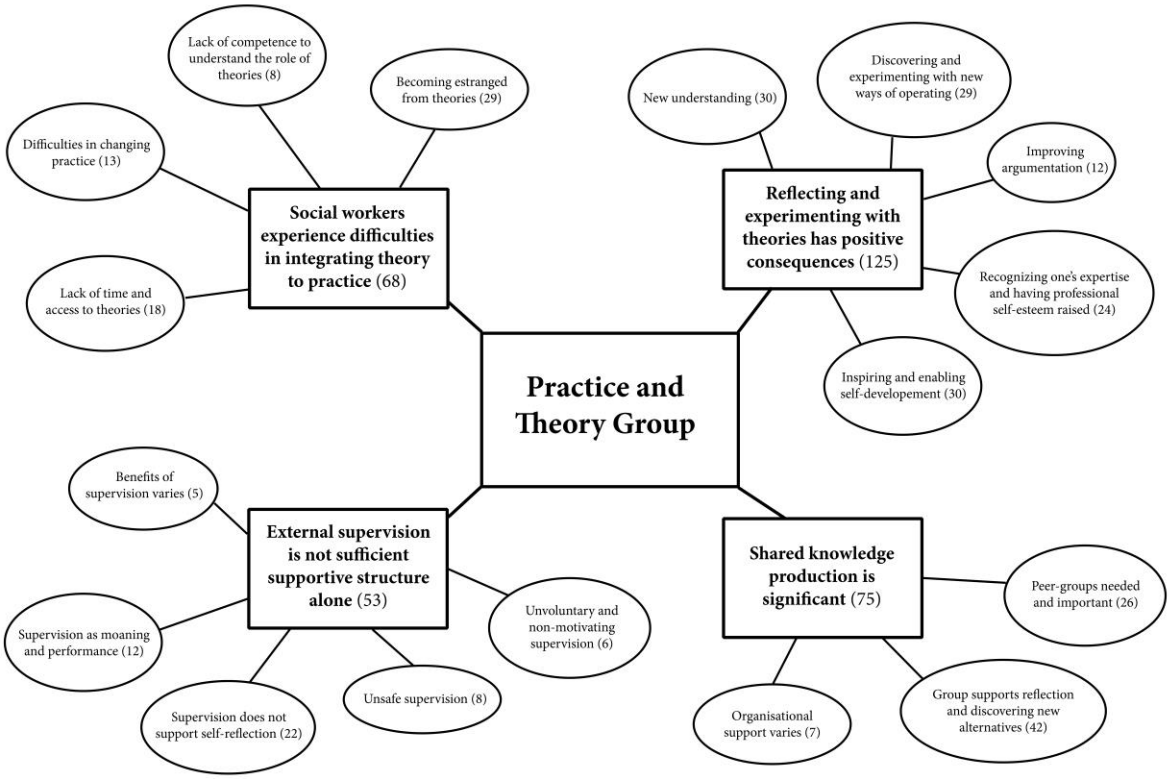

Figure 1. Over-arching themes and sub-themes.

Next, we will present the results regarding the difficulties and consequences of integrating theory into practice. In the results we present samples of the data that support our interpretation. The data excerpts have been translated from Finnish into English. To maintain confidentiality, we do not identify from which group each data extract is from.

Results

Difficulties in integrating theory into practice

The social workers that participated in the group explained that in everyday work, theoretical knowledge was only rarely or hardly ever used consciously. The social workers discussed different factors that made it more difficult to use theoretical knowledge in their own work: 1)

lack of time and access to theories, 2) difficulties in changing one's own practice and establish supportive structures, 3) lack of competence to understand the role of theories, and 4) having become estranged from theories.

First, participants mentioned lack of time to read and access written material. The participants felt that they did not have the time to read and reflect on their own work (also Gray et al., 2012; Beddoe, 2011). In addition to time management, the participants said that one practical issue was that new knowledge in closed databases was not easily available or that they did not even know how to search for the information they needed (also Teater, 2017; Gray et al., 2012). Planning and managing their time was frustrating for the participants and generated feelings of guilt. Instead of focusing on research knowledge, the social workers prioritized client work, as described in the following excerpt:

> *… we always prioritize client work, which sometimes annoys me a lot. I have often had the good intention of setting aside an afternoon or a couple of hours a month or whatever to read something because I feel really guilty about not reading any professional literature, but I don't have the time. Why do I always spend that time on client stuff and not that?*

Though finding time to read and access the databases is difficult, the social workers said that they had access to interesting and beneficial information in the different types of trainings offered to them. One isolated training does not, however, necessarily lead to reshaping one's own work, unlike the Practice and Theory group, which includes practical experiments and the shared discussions that emerge from them. Training can easily remain disconnected and its effects on work can be minimal, as one social worker describes:

> *I mean I might sit somewhere for a day and listen to three or four different lectures there by some doctor or psychologist or someone else, and then when I leave not think about it much in my work. Here it was sort of like it was the whole point that I'd think about it for the next two weeks in my work. Then it sort of becomes more a part of my work, that theory and that information that I got, rather than that sort of isolated training.*

Second, delving into theoretical knowledge is made more difficult by the challenges and incapability involved in adopting a new way of practising on your own. For example, one social worker said that when she was still studying, she had the intention of applying theories that came out in her studies in her own work, but this was forgotten whenever she went to work, which was frustrating for her. The participants thought that reserving time together with a team would make it easier to plan their timetables and it would also justify the time spent. But though these wishes had been brought up in their teams, due to prioritization at work, these intentions were not realized, as one social worker describes:

> *I do think that all of us should read professional literature in our work and such. But where does the time come from? We have had sort of good intentions of how we will read something and think about it in our team. But always, with all the hurry and everything else, it's the first thing you leave out.*

Third, the participants brought up their lack of competence to understand the role of theoretical and research-based knowledge in practice (also Teater, 2017; Gray et al., 2012; Beddoe, 2011). While the Practice and Theory group intervention offered them information about combining theory and practice and a concrete tool to practise it, they reflected how previously they had not been able to consciously connect the theories they had studied in university to their own

professional work. The participants said that reading theories and *applying them in research* was familiar from their studies, but they thought that theoretical knowledge is difficult to *apply to practice* smoothly, as the social workers said:

> *I remember from my studies that those theories didn't interest me in any way, or somehow they felt distant, so I thought "who cares, I'll learn at work" or something, but these have helped a lot and clarified what these theories are in practice.*

Fourth, the participants in the group felt that they had not been able to sufficiently maintain their theoretical knowledge of social work after their studies and had become estranged from theory. In part, there were also prejudices about applying theoretical knowledge – that they are separate from practical work (also Hothersall, 2017). One social worker describes their understanding before participating in the group:

> *When you read a theory, it might seem a little distant. During this group I have noticed that the theories aren't just floating around on the outside, not connected to reality, but rather theories come from reality, like I've noticed that and maybe Goffman also put some flesh on his bones through practice.*

In child welfare, legal knowledge often guides client work and processes (Lonne et al., 2016). However, in the group interviews the participants noticed that the law did not provide enough tools to do the work, and this was also noted in the after-group interviews. This next thought demonstrates this:

> *But we know the law, and that is really easy. Then it's the only the grounds for argumentation. I don't mean the only one, but I'm exaggerating. Then there's even*

> *stronger pressure to be judicial, because you don't remember those [theoretical principles]*.

All the participants felt that theoretical knowledge is useful and important – though previous difficulties in applying the knowledge also weakened their professional self-esteem. All the social workers, however, said they realized the importance of combining theory and research in their client work. Next, we will look at what sorts of effects the social workers felt that reflection on and application of theoretical knowledge had on their own work.

Consequences of reflecting on and experimenting with theoretical knowledge

The participants considered that reflecting on theoretical knowledge in the pilot intervention group was significant because it 1) enabled new understanding as well as 2) allowed discovering and experimenting with new ways of operating. Participating in the group also 3) improved one's argumentation, 4) helped to recognize one's expertise and raised professional self-esteem as well as 5) enabled self-development. Next, we elaborate these experienced consequences.

First, reflecting and experimenting with theoretical knowledge enabled new understanding and knowledge production. Though the theory summaries did not offer direct solutions or ready models for client work, according to the participants, they worked as tools in analysing their own thoughts and actions. The theories and research helped to create distance to one's own work, to look at it from a new point of view and recognize and verbalize one's own actions, as this social worker describes:

> *I could reflect in a completely new way why I do social work or what it means or why I make certain decisions, or what effects some actions have.*

The participants noticed that the theoretical knowledge also deepened their understanding of their clients' situations. Reflecting on theoretical work offered both intellectual perceptions and possible interpretations of a client's situation, as well as the workers to think about the client's experience and see it from their point of view.

Second, reflecting on the theories and research enabled the participants to discover increased courage to experiment with new ways of operating. The participants described how they, for example, focused on to how they speak with clients and which words they use after discussing the conceptualization of 'having to' (Juvonen 2014) or, based on Goffmann's (1955/2016) work, they purposely tried to do positive and respective facework with their clients.

One social worker shared her experience of trying to apply research presenting ethical decision-making principles in child protection (see Lonne et al., 2016). In a meeting with a father and a child, the social workers decided to use drawing boards to visualize the timeplan for foster care and by doing so to adhere to the principles of ethical decision-making where power, responsibilities and options were considered, as the social worker describes:

> *We sort of talked about what the responsibilities for adults are considering the child's future, and what is right for the child and that there will be efforts to somehow protect him or her and ensure a better future.*

Reflecting on the situation afterwards or consciously applying a hypothesis in practice was significant for the participants' understanding of the connectedness of theory and practice. One social worker, for example, explained how the reflective and experimental approach turned difficult and burdensome situations into inspiring opportunities.

Third, the participants felt that the theoretical discussions improved their argumentation skills and their ability to explain their decisions. The social workers found it significant that they noticed how their argumentative skills had improved especially in multiprofessional meetings with, for instance, healthcare professionals. Reflecting on theories and research helped them explain to others what social work and a social worker's expertise is about, because sometimes it can be difficult for others to understand this, and theoretical knowledge also offered tools to verbalize readings of client situations. One social worker said that the discussions also helped them explain to new employees what social work is about.

Strengthened argumentative skills were also considered important for client reports. Instead of the social worker merely describing the client's situation, the participants recognized how important it was to also be able to analyse and evaluate the situation and justify interpretations or solutions, as is evident in the following situation:

> *Our documents are, I think, mostly descriptions, and their conclusions and analyses are always somehow smaller and weaker. And there may be ridiculous reasoning, for instance why a child protection clientship is started, like 'because this is the third investigation'. Well that can't be a reason. I would like to use more of that research stuff, and maybe I have once or twice written or referred to research, but mostly it isn't done.*

Being engaged in the process of testing hypotheses and making observations enables contemplating different possible interpretations, justifying why the conclusions would least likely be wrong and articulating practice. Arguably, social workers' ability to articulate their knowledge and theorize their practice would benefit the quality and accountability of social work (Forte, 2014, 25; Osmon and O'Connor, 2004; Fook, 2002).

Fourth, according to the participants analysing their own work was important for their professional self-esteem. Research has argued that social workers can feel they are not viewed intellectually robust and they may lack confidence in using research-based knowledge and to attend scholarly conversations (Beddoe, 2011) However, in the Practice and Theory group reflecting on the theoretical knowledge and applying an experimental method made it possible for the participants to recognize their own expertise, as mentioned in the following quote:

> *I was also just thinking about professional identity. Wow, the things I can do! Often I have had the feeling that, man, I do good work. Or even with failed experiments, I realize what it's about and next time I can try and see if it would work another way.*

The realization of how the theoretical discussions connect to their own work and their own expertise was professionally empowering for the participants – especially when many participants described how they had previously felt frustration, guilt or shame about barely combining theoretical knowledge with their own action. Small experiments based on a theoretical framework increased the workers' wellbeing and strengthened their faith in the ability to connect theoretical knowledge to their own work – even if only in small steps:

> *I feel almost sort of empowered in a way, that in our work we can apply this sort of theory, I think it's been lovely to notice that, or somehow that it's possible.*

Fifth, participating in the group directed the social workers towards self-development. The participants described how it was inspiring and educational to develop their work. Participating in the group made it easier for the participants to read more research and have discussions about theories that guide their work, as described by one participant:

> *I could go back and study now, I could maybe understand something, I don't remember much about theories from my student days, other than what I have had to learn for exams.*

Though the participants emphasized their experiences of strengthening their theoretical understanding, they also discussed the courage to admit not knowing, trying different methods and thinking about failure. Open discussion about the challenges and complex situations of social work – without choosing a wrong or a right solution – helped the participants to broaden their views and options.

Above we have described the experienced difficulties and consequences of connecting theory and practice. The Practice and Theory group offered the participants a place to speak about their own professional work orientation with other professionals and the support offered by the group was considered significant for the success in reflecting on theories in practice. The structure of the group supported the worker in easing the tension between lack of time and delving into research by justifying their use of time and by establishing themselves as learners. At the same time, shared discussions broadened their views and made it possible to develop ideas and realizations together. This was also significant for the participants' argumentation skills, professional self-esteem and motivation for self-development.

Discussion

The primary goal of this research was to create a solution for combining theory and practice in social work. Although Finnish social work education includes studying social science theories

and research along with practice skills, social workers are struggling with actively and consciously combining theoretical knowledge with their practice. The experienced barriers are similar to the results of studies in other countries (Teater, 2017; Gray et al., 2012; Beddoe, 2011; Nutley et al., 2007, 81−83).

The participants in the study experienced pressure, inadequacy and shame in not being able to utilize theory and research in their practice. As social work is a pressured profession in many ways, these experiences are disconcerting and lead to questions about how the burden could be lightened. Instead of pointing the finger at the practitioner for not taking advantage of scientific research, the results challenge service organizations to create a research-minded organizational culture (also Gray et al., 2012; McBeath & Austin, 2015). Research-minded practice requires a space in which the social workers can regularly and systematically explore research, analyse their practice and find new perspectives.

Practice and Theory group intervention helped the participants realize how theories and research-based knowledge can operate as instruments in analysing and operating in practice. In the group, questioning the theoretical knowledge together with the observations made led the practitioners to invent hypotheses and experiment with them in practice. This kind of experimental approach, based on pragmatist epistemology, enables knowledge production within social work practice (also Muurinen, 2019). The participants felt that the reflective and experimental approach applied in the Practice and Theory group was significant as it enabled them to recognize their expertise and helped them to build or restore their professional self-esteem.

Thus, the Practice and Theory group intervention resisted putting the blame on practitioners for not utilizing research and instead endowed an area for collaborative knowledge production. This

contributes to the well-being of the social workers, the quality of the services and the discovery of new forms of helping the clients. Similar results of gaining new self-understanding, mastery and sense of new choices have been found in other reflective groups (Kivipelto & Yliruka, 2012; Nilsen et al., 2011; Fook and Gardner, 2007, 143; Fook and Askeland, 2006). We propose that Practice and Theory group intervention could accompany these reflective practices.

Although the reflective structures enable tackling the barriers of integrating theory into practice, the research results also address the issue already in social work education. It was striking to hear the social workers described how they had not understood the role of research and theory during their studies. As educators, are we able to model the students' research-minded practice? This question led us to conduct teaching experiments to introduce the group intervention as part of the training of social worker bachelor students (Jäppinen et al., in review).

The research has its limitations. The facilitators' roles as designers of the group and as researchers may have influenced the participants' positive feedback. The leaders could have been considered authorities with their academic and organizational positions, which could encourage social desirability bias (also Nilsen et al., 2011). During the group and in the interviews, we explained that the group intervention was still being developed and we encouraged the participants to be critical, and the participants assured us that in the group context the positions did not have an influence. In doing the analysis, researcher-triangulation can be considered to increase the reliability of the results.

All the participants were voluntary and had an interest in social science theories. It is possible that if the group would be adopted as an organizational practice, in which everyone is expected to take part, more critical voices would be raised. The shared experiences may also be subjected, for

example, to confirmation bias and reflect the normative assumptions. However, the data triangulation of the three groups and similar results in each case support the analysis.

In future research concerning Practice and Theory group intervention, it would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study of the consequences the participants experience. It could also be beneficial to analyse similar groups led by different facilitators. Moreover, investigating the group model in different countries would be interesting as the educational backgrounds are different. We consider that continuing research on intervention is well justified as the results of the intervention seem promising.

The Practice and Theory group intervention aimed to address a long-discussed problem in social work on how to integrate theory and practice. Thus, it was quite surprising for us to notice how such a small intervention could bring positive changes in the participants' work and improve their self-esteem. Selecting one piece of research or theory at a time and emphasizing a small, experimental approach was significant both practically and mentally as it lessens the imagined academic ivory tower thinking. Embedding the inquiry into everyday practices allows existing habits to be challenged, creates a reflective attitude towards one's own work and its structures, and enables the social workers to explain and argue about their practice. Applying theory and research and engaging in dialogic discussions about this connection opens up alternative ways to help clients.

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